

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## *A Personal History of Vision* by Luke Fischer (UWA Publishing, 2017)

Human vision is itself an artifact, shaped by other artifacts, namely pictures, all perception thus being the result of historical changes in representation. An image can, then, signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental or verbal phenomena. One needs to look no further than Luke Fischer's *A Personal History of Vision* to realise this.

Fischer's book is an amalgamation of the apparent visual and an imagined verbal climate that might surround it with its hot suns, hard rains and untimely tempests. As he reminds us at the end of his roll call of dedicatees in 'Floating Seeds', a poem 'offers nothing / but a castle in the air'. By attempting the impossible a poem evokes the impossible as a prospect.

Fischer's poems are conceived as an allegorical homecoming. And he chooses his own context with clarity. Elements that signify his personal experiences and narratives that are disseminated as a part and parcel of genealogical inheritance, are placed as a thick layering of cultural matter as he leads the viewer in a visual perambulation into his own constructions of memory, of travel, of moving into and out of spaces, and the light that inhabits those spaces.

At the peril of stating the obvious, Fischer is painterly. In his poems a sheer knowledge of history breaks out of the waters from time to time. And the free-play of Ekphrasis that curls like a sea round these eruptions is an understanding of the traditional methods of painting and sculpting that allow him to create characters in a play of line and depth, of reality and vision, weaving disparate contexts into a unified mass. The deftness of Fischer's painterly hand manifests itself in those poems which are like preparatory cartoons for that grand canvas:

Incrementally impressed  
by smiling, thinking and looking hard –  
fossils of skin – presaging a far-off unity  
of wisdom and joy – like shafts through clouds  
they ray out from twin suns.

(‘On the Beauty of Eye Wrinkles’)

The artist's scheme of breaking the canvas into small fragmented planes in Fischer's poetry creates a sense of the shattered picture plane that confines the substance of his narrative. This breaking up of space allows more facets of event and experience to glow and surprise us in the penumbra of everyday life.

as the waitress takes my empty cup  
we surprise each other  
face  
to  
face  
an icon on a chapel wall  
glimpsed in a candle's  
flicker

(‘Glance’)

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In 'Annunciation' Fischer achieves a brilliant translation of the pictorial vacancy in Fra Angelico's fresco as a terse efflorescence of words carefully unpacks the ells of silence and light broken by the columns and bordered by the garden. Fischer's act of ekphrastic translation extends even to the conception of the two columns on the physical page. Fischer's poem plunges down like the hermit hawk in a vertical view of spiritual history that ranges across centuries of adoration, mystery and myth and arrives at this startling afternoon scene in the convent and its garden. The breathlessness of this arrival and the carefully breathed out rendition of the scene are both evident in the fine trapeze act of the lines across the void of the caesurae.

Fischer's lines course down the vortex of art history as he arrives at the earthiness of Mary's dress in Angelico's fresco via the tonal portraiture of still life in Giorgio Morandi's work. Uncannily, both Angelico and Morandi hail from the same region, and Fischer's sudden bringing together of 'the pastel clay', that is 'the colour of humility' in these two painters, like castaways on the shores of five centuries, seems no less than an illuminated mystery that has defied solution.

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Her midnight blue mantle | falls without resistance |
| She notices its weight   | her posture              |
| less than a person       | feels a blanket in sleep |

Ekphrasis, so often the dragon's teeth sown in the turf between painting and poetry, does not yield a harvest of negativity in 'Annunciation'. Fischer's poem turns a brilliant nugget in Fra Angelico, the feeling of weight that the look of the blue blanket gives and the association it has with restfulness, into a sensitive anecdote that takes in minute details of the garden scene like the light.

In 'Madonna of the Goldfinch', based on Raphael's painting of the same title, Fischer brings art history and Australian national history to a heady mix in his description of the Madonna. His diction exfoliates with nature harnessing architectural forms, an organic life putting a soft glove around the angularities of learnedness:

The blue sky around her head  
a natural mandorla  
framed by unmoving clouds

The expanse and release of the blue sky and the ossified cloud in the painting are brought to a pointed resolution in the phrase 'natural mandorla', the mere spectre of an oxymoron drifting across the lines like cloud shadow. Fischer evokes Raphael's time and writes the poem sitting in the smithy of the Urbino artist's imagination. So Fischer's poem is not an account of Raphael's painting, but the painting done afresh in words.

Her dress and mantle are a crimson rosella's  
breast and wings ... an angelic bird  
landed in a Tuscan field?

Fischer's lines have a thing-heavy fall, and a lugubrious matter-of-factness that can easily beguile even an ardent poetry lover into questioning the life that lies coiled like a spring in them. He has the same love for the accretion of the starkness and acuteness of pictorial detail that the American poet William Carlos Williams had developed in his late cycle of poems *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). – And the 'crimson rosella' (a bird integral to Australian fauna) is a brilliant touch as Fischer's Australian Muse comes to roost at the heart of Raphael's canvas. No wonder, as Fischer cheekily suggests, that baby Christ looks on, not at John the Baptist, the great herald of Christendom, like the old continent, but 'into another space': possibly Australia.

Fischer's poetry demonstrates in the same moment the weakness and the strength of an urban consciousness grappling with nature imagery. In one of several instances in *A Personal History of Vision* of this crossroads, decision-demanding moment where an aspect of nature, its vision, challenges the poet, Fischer falls back upon the built and the architectural, the art-historical, that translates nature in its own idiom. The results can be intellectually fascinating – the conceit as well chiselled as God's index finger on the dome of Sistine Chapel – the minuteness of detail offset by the vastness of its reference, across cultural history.

When you sit on a stone  
among wild flowers in mid-bloom,  
the mosaic in Monreale comes to mind,  
of God on the seventh day  
seated at the centre of his garden,  
how his surroundings seemed real  
yet internal to his mind.

('View from the Mountain: Sicily')

Fischer's poetry dwells upon the expansion of the moment by way of the prostheses of vision: the sound, colour, weight and brush of vision, that of the open eye and the shut one too. This expansion of the present, for which he claims he writes, is

vital as breath to an empty lung,  
for the garden that grows around me,  
whether I'm in the city or on a mountain –

('Why I Write')

A visionary journey with Luke Fischer is like sauntering through downtown gridlocks in great cities with wisteria and vines, honey bees and angophoras in hanging gardens of the mind casting inverted shadows like reflections in water in a Monet painting.

The visions in *A Personal History of Vision* provoke an organic growth of the reader's mind. They inspire parallel journeys, like the ones Fischer himself makes in the poems. Any attempt to hoard his images for that dungeon of glossary is met with a grasp of thin air and a gasp of the critic's exasperation. He is like his own description of the cormorant who 'drifts, dives and comes up elsewhere'.

**Debasish Lahiri**